

A
SERMON

ON

THE LATE FAST.

1797.



A

SERMON,

PREACHED AT

ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH,

LIVERPOOL,

On Wednesday the 8th of March,

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED FOR

A GENERAL FAST.

By the Rev. FRODSHAM HODSON, M. A.

FELLOW OF BRASEN NOSE COLLEGE, OXFORD.

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ST. GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL

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To

The Worshipful GEORGE DUNBAR Esq. Mayor,

To

The ALDERMEN,

The BAILIFFS,

And

The other MEMBERS

Of the COMMON COUNCIL of Liverpool,

The following Sermon is humbly inscribed,

As a Testimony of Respect,

By their obliged and obedient Servant,

FRODSHAM HODSON.

A

SERMON, &c.

JEREM. xlvii. 6, 7.

*O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? put
up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still.*

*How can it be quiet, seeing the Lord hath given it a charge against Asb-
kelon, and against the sea-shore?*

WHEN we deplore the calamities, and deprecate the continuance of war; when we weep over our Jerusalem, depopulated and impoverished; when we sympathize with the victims of interrupted commerce and unsuccessful industry, we seem to forget that such visitations, for some good purpose, however invisible to mortal eye, are appointed by the unerring wisdom of Omniscience. For if our grief be real, and our sympathy sincere, we should not rest satisfied with mere expressions of unavailing regret; but, adapting our means to our end, should endeavour to secure the protection of that Being, who presides over the mighty revolutions of the universe, on whose nod depend the prosperity of nations and the duration of empires, and whose power can at once harmonize the conflicting passions of his creatures, and hush the troubled world to peace. Instead, therefore, of listening to the gloomy eloquence of complaint, or credulously pursuing the phantoms of hope, we should ask ourselves the important question, whether it is not for our sins that we are thus scourged by God? and instead of reclining in indolent

repose, and waiting with insensibility the tardy return of peace, we should labour to propitiate the Almighty by reforming those habits, and abandoning those crimes, which have probably brought down upon us the vengeance of offended Heaven.

They, I am aware, who do not admit, as applied to kingdoms, what is the best foundation of the Christian patriot's hope, the guardian care and the controlling power of God; but consider nations as proudly moving on, neither accelerated nor retarded in their progress by the interference of a superiour Being, may deride the appropriation of a particular day to the purpose of national humiliation, as nugatory; perhaps may reprobate it, as superstitious. But I speak not to them; I speak to those, who believe in an universal superintendence of Providence, because they are told, on the authority of inspiration, that "not a sparrow falls to the ground without his permission;" and who hope to obtain, as the reward of penitence and prayer, a particular interposition of that Providence in their favour, because the Almighty has himself declared, "Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest to your souls*." I speak to those, who have scriptural evidence for asserting, that local punishments are inflicted for local crimes; to those, who in the history of the Jews can read a practical illustration of this doctrine; who can uniformly trace the vicissitudes of their fortune to a variation in their conduct; and who, believing the dispensations of the Almighty to them to be

* Jeremiah vi, 16.

only an epitome of his general government, whenever they see public prosperity following in the train of public virtue, view them as linked together in natural alliance, and rising in natural succession ; and when they see national impiety pursued by national adversity, consider it as resulting from the order of Providence, and the established constitution of things. Such Christians, then, can have no doubt of our calamities being inflicted by a God of justice, for the punishment of our sins ; and can have as little, of the probable efficacy which general repentance will have in procuring an alleviation of them from a God of mercy.

Were we to carry our observations as far as the ravages of war extend, we should still find proofs of our general position ; we should still find some traces of guilt, and some testimonies of judgment ; we should be able to connect the punishment with the crime, and justify the ways of God to man ! Few of us are so little acquainted with the history of Modern Europe, or at least of its fairest portion, as to be astonished that those enormities, which had so long excited the abhorrence of man, should at last have been visited by God ! When we recollect that for sins, hardly more heinous, the whole creation was nearly swept away by a deluge, can we wonder at that work of death and desolation, which has been so long carried on, and which as yet, I fear, no very obvious symptoms of repentance call upon the great Ruler of the universe to terminate or suspend ? To so comprehensive an inquiry, however, as would embrace all the nations now groaning under the horrors of war, I feel it unnecessary to beg your attention ;—not that

a Christian's concern should be limited to the natives of his own country, or the professors of his own religion ;—but, as a point of duty, it is incumbent upon us to institute an examination first into our own conduct ; and that view of the subject which I shall submit to you, may perhaps be thought, without the tediousness of detail, to apply to other nations also !

Though not insensible to that bright assemblage of virtues which form and uphold the national character—to that inflexible integrity, which in commercial transactions commands reverence, in the remotest quarters of the globe ; or to that genuine charity, which is diffused through so many channels, and under so many forms, as to exceed all former efforts of benevolence, there still, I fear, are vices of the blackest aggravation and the most malignant tendency, which want not their patrons in the nation. I will not now enlarge upon that profligate spirit of gaming, the bane of every Christian grace, and every moral virtue ;—the grave of every principle, of justice, and of honour. I will not now enlarge upon the general prevalence of luxury, which, comparatively speaking, has reached the humblest cells, and which, even in a season of apprehended poverty, exhibits scenes of prodigality and riot ! I will not now enlarge upon that incessant pursuit of wealth, which occupies the labours of the day and the anxieties of the night, and which has made the cares of business interrupt the duties of religion ! I am more anxious to fix your attention on what seems to me to be the root of the evil ; to be the characteristic vice of the age, and the prolific source of all our other crimes ;—that, which, though it can boast, thank Heaven, a more extensive empire on the continent,

is yet one which the future historian of Britain must record, as illustrating the character of the country.

I allude to that almost universal disposition to doubt, to that real or affected scepticism, which at this moment prevails in this as well as in other parts of Christendom; and which, if it does not amount to actual infidelity, resembles it at least in this unfortunate particular, that it intercepts those virtues which would naturally grow out of an unshaken belief in the truth of Christianity. It is to this fundamental crime, that all our errors in speculation, as well as almost all our vices in practice, are to be traced. So fatal has been its operation on the mind, that in many instances, SOMETHING, misnamed philosophy, has been suffered to abrogate the authority of revelation; and in one instance, too notorious to be overlooked, on the ruins of renounced and rejected Christianity was erected the temple of reason! Now, though I do not mean to intimate (Heaven forbid that the occasion should ever exist which would call for such intimation!) that *we* have ever been betrayed into such dreadful idolatry, yet we have of late been so far contaminated by the general contagion, that we have been rather a nation of philosophers than of believers. Some amongst us have cavilled at our forms of devotion, and others have inveighed against all social worship: some amongst us have doubted, and others have denied, the credibility of the Gospel: some have derided the humility of its precepts, and many have arraigned its awful mysteries at the fallible tribunal of reason. After having loosened the foundation of our faith by questioning the mysteries, the transition is not difficult to doubt the truth, of Christianity; and he who has once brought

himself to doubt its truth, will soon disclaim the authority of its precepts. In this rapid manner does doubt insensibly gain strength, till it transfuses itself into our practice, to the neglect of the ordinances, and the violation of the commandments of God. Emancipated from the salutary restraints which religion mildly exercises over the Christian's mind, the unbeliever knows no standard of duty but his own ungoverned will ; no measure of happiness but his own caprice : he no longer reverences virtue as the means of procuring the approbation of Him, on whom salvation depends ; nor does vice itself retain any of its terrors in his eyes, who considers death as an eternal sleep !

Nor does the evil stop here ; for when the mind is become subject to the fluctuations of doubt, it is so unhinged as it were, that all its functions are deranged, and all its movements irregular ; its views are so darkened, and its faculties so distorted, that it cannot divest itself of its perverseness, nay indeed, can not remedy its defects, when employed in the investigation of other important subjects which come within the contemplation of man. To exemplify this assertion in one fatal error, flowing from the same source, and, in my mind, intimately connected with the origin of the present war ;—I advert to the popular discussions of what are called the natural rights of man, and the controverted authority of establishments.

He who doubts the authenticity of revelation will of course care little for any information it may contain with regard to the creation, or the fall, of man ; with regard to the unbending corruption of his nature ; his present dependence, or his future

responsibility. And yet, how little of truth is to be ascertained on the subject of the human œconomy without the aid of revelation, the unavailing labours of philosophy for four thousand years afford a melancholy proof. Thus, they must almost of necessity deviate into error, who to all their disquisitions into the structure of society, the origin of government, the formation of laws, the general principles of civil institutions, bring with them this vitiated frame of mind, this distempered reason, Suspending their assent, or at least not actuated by a peremptory conviction of the truth of revelation, they have no fixed principles upon which they can build, but such as their own precarious speculations suggest; nor any infallible standard (but what they have themselves erected) to which they can refer; which might correct the aberrations of reason, and control the wildness of fancy. Hence they clamour about imprescriptible rights, as if they were self-created beings; they declaim upon perfection, as if they retained their primitive innocence; they talk about happiness, as if they had never been driven out of paradise!

Whether or not other causes may have co-operated to break asunder those bands which alone can knit together society, it is foreign to my purpose to inquire; content to lay before you, what seems to me a close and intimate connexion between a relaxation of religious faith, and a dereliction of public principle; between our duty to God as rational, and our allegiance to government as social, creatures.

In corroboration of what is here advanced, it is impossible

not to recall your recollection to those vague and indefinite notions of obedience, which, not many years since, were so industriously inculcated on the public mind, and gave birth to a laxity of principle, wholly incompatible with the peace and order of society ;—a principle, naturally springing out of doctrines so artfully circulated, and which, though success had marked their progress in a greater degree in other countries in proportion to the greater decay of Christian piety, had been no where propagated with more active zeal than in our own.—Religion must be exiled, and no more encumber the state ; the benefit of experience was to be rejected ; all existing modes of government were to be abolished, as the misshapen fabrics of ignorance and superstition, and to make room, for *what ?*—for baseless and impracticable theories, imaginary governments for imaginary men, neither adapted to the situation, nor assimilated to the nature of man ;—framed on a sort of metaphysical abstraction, without any reference to his passions or his prejudices ; without any provision for his wants or his weaknesses. Misguided by that sceptical spirit, which, if not crushed in its first rudiments, pervades the whole intellectual system, and deluded by the imposing plausibility of those doctrines, the reception of which was facilitated by the absence of religious principle, there were some, who would have pushed them to their utmost extent ; and there were many, who, from a sullen desire of a spurious kind of independence, would have despoiled our civil establishment of its monarchy, and our ecclesiastical one of its episcopacy. It is impossible that this statement should be thought exaggerated, when you recollect some events which have occurred during the war ;—they tell us, though we have not yet

committed that foul and atrocious deed, which would call upon us to solemnize the anniversary of another murdered sovereign, yet they tell us in language too plain to be misunderstood, and by efforts too often repeated to be mistaken, that there did exist a disposition to effect that tragical catastrophe, and along with it to introduce faction into the state, and schism into the church ! Without, therefore, presuming to scan the dark and intricate ways of Heaven, or to reduce to principles, within the contracted grasp of man, the mysterious dealings of God, we may safely say, that a people, who were thus seduced by religious scepticism into licentious politics—who could, after having attained under a particular form of government a degree of practical prosperity unparalleled in the annals of the world, except in the history of a Theocracy, who could for a moment harbour a wish or tolerate an attempt to change, were unworthy of the distinguished favour of Heaven—were fit objects of that chastisement which is due to ingratitude, nay I think we may call it rebellion against the dispensations of Providence, unless we are prepared to assert that such transcendent happiness could result from mere human institutions, unhallowed by the blessing of God.

What gives additional confirmation to this train of reflexions is the much severer chastisement, which has attended the actual adoption of those wild and unwieldy principles in a country, compared with which our distress is happiness. There too, the insidious labours of philosophy had long been directed to poison the public mind, in order that it might more feebly resist those principles, from the bare contemplation of which it would have shrunk with dismay in its happier state of faith,

untainted with suspicion, and unclouded with doubt. But with what rapidity they spread, when infidelity had once paved the way for their admission, and what havock they carried with them in their progress, the history of that country tells, written in characters of blood. I will not shock your sensibility with a recital of those outrages, against which justice has so often indignantly exclaimed, and over which humanity has shed so many tears. But to the general effects of their chimerical code I must point, as carrying with them their own punishment, and sealing their own condemnation ! They, who used to chaunt the pious hymns of praise, and elevate the steadfast eye of faith to their Redeemer on his Cross, now celebrate the mad orgies of idolatry to a being, worthy of such votaries, to the prostituted patroness of their visionary scheme of freedom ! They who used to repair to the hallowed fane, and the sacred retreat of piety, are now robbed of the instructions of religion to guide them through life, and of its consolations to cheer them in death ! They, whose country was once the abode of learning and the nurse of science, have plundered their noblest institutions with the rapacity of robbers, and driven with the fury of unrelenting persecution from their splendid palaces and their peaceful homes, those who might have had the power of extending their patronage to science, and those who might have had the glory of deserving it.—Those fertile plains, which once smiled with plenty, have been drenched with native blood ! Torn from the bosom of his family, the helpless peasant is forced to fight the battles of lawless usurpation, whilst he reluctantly leaves, it may be, his infant children, or his aged parents, not to be protected by the friendly hand of Government—not to be relieved by the con-

tributions of individual benevolence, but to be dragged before a bloody tribunal, where the smiling innocence of youth, or the supplicating decrepitude of age is no security;—where condemnation keeps pace with suspicion, and death with condemnation! Such, your own observation will attest, have been the genuine effects, the legitimate fruits of that desolating system, to which some wished the venerable fabric of the British constitution to bow in ignominious submission!

How far those fantastic principles, propagated by the philosopher and adopted by the infidel, are capable of being digested into a practicable form of government; competent to secure individual protection, and to diffuse general happiness, is an experiment which has been made: but not, blessed be God, in our own country; it has, however, been made; and the horrible convulsions which it has produced, and the storms and tempests, with which it has agitated the world, proclaim this awful truth, that to legislate in contempt of Revelation is to wage war against Heaven!—by mistaking the nature, and overlooking the designation of man, it is to multiply crimes, and disseminate misery.

From us the danger has been for a time removed; the pestilence has been stayed;—but not, alas! without many a widow's sighs for husbands slain, and many a mother's tears for murdered sons! Illustrious shades! To you, under the favour of Heaven we owe the existence of equal laws, and the enjoyment of substantial freedom! To you, who have given time to these principles to display their baleful influence, to you we owe it, that the home-

bred Briton still turns away with horror from freedom when arrayed in the bloody garb of insurrection ; that he still rejects the proffered boon, unless it is secured by law, unless it is tempered with social order, unless it is associated with moral virtue, unless it is enshrined within the sanctuary of religion.—As dangers multiply, and difficulties accumulate, may kindred spirits still be found to avenge their country's wrongs ! But wherefore here prefer this prayer, when recent occurrences have shewn, that however other nations may be lost to the feelings of nature, or a sense of public spirit, you at least are not insensible to the charities of social life, of father, husband, friend, nor unprepared to range yourselves under the banners of freedom and of law. However others may be so far dazzled by the success of the common enemy of mankind as to overlook the enormity of their crimes in the splendour of their conquests, you have never lost sight of the radical depravity of their principles ; amidst their shouts of triumph in other countries, you still can hear what they have left behind them in their own,—the execrations of weakness trampled upon, and the cries of innocence oppressed ! With a zeal, therefore, worthy of its cause, and with a spirit proportioned to the desperation which it was to face, you have shewn yourselves eager to repel the invading foe from a land, which still can boast, that it is the favourite residence of freedom.

Would to Heaven, that the time at last were come, when, admonished by the terrible warning held out to us by others, we were willing to make the same efforts to revive the spirit of our religion, and to diffuse its vital energy over all the

transactions of our lives ! We might then hope, that the flames of civil discord would be for ever extinguished, and that the din of arms would cease.—When bowed down in contrite humiliation for our sins, we attest our sincerity by our repentance, when our petitions for happiness come recommended by our obedience, we may then trust that the Almighty will have compassion on his faithful people ; that he will sanctify the counsels, and prosper the designs of those who watch over the interests of their country ; that he will give effect to all our humble efforts to promote the public good ;—that he will deign to bless the calm occupations of agriculture, and the adventurous pursuits of commerce ; that the great God of battles will crown with victories, more signally triumphant even than he has lately vouchsafed to do, the steady courage of our troops, and the enterprising valour of our fleets ; and that, whilst he secures to us domestic tranquillity, he will restore to us external peace, honourable in its provisions and permanent in its duration, by continuing to impart to us the means of asserting the rights, of vindicating the independence, of sustaining the dignity of a great and powerful nation !

THE END.

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calm occupations of agriculture, commerce, and the arts;
of commerce; that the East and West may flourish in peace
and plenty; that the whole human race may be united in
the bonds of friendship and love, and that the world may be
governed by wisdom and justice, and that the reign of
peace and plenty may be established on earth, and the
kingdom of God may be brought near to us.



Lately Published by the same Author,

The Eternal Filiation of the Son of God asserted,
*On the evidence of the Sacred Scriptures, the consent of the Fathers of
the three first Centuries, and the authority of the Nicene Council.*

THE END